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Thursday, August 28, 2008

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Three Rivers Rep. Shaffer may request hearing into Calista Springer's death

Thursday, August 28, 2008

Kalamazoo

BY KATHY JESSUP

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CENTREVILLE -- State Rep. Rick Shaffer, R-Three Rivers, said Wednesday he will request a legislative hearing into the death of Calista Springer if the Michigan Department of Human Services fails to release the findings of its investigation in the coming months.

Shaffer, minority vice chairman of the House Appropriations' human services subcommittee, said the St. Joseph County Department of Human Services' handling of past reports of suspected abuse and neglect involving Calista deserves a "thorough investigation."

"It might be premature to expect the findings right now," said Shaffer, who attended a community gathering Wednesday in Centreville marking the six-month anniversary of the girl's death. "But we will appreciate the expedient reporting when it's finished. If it isn't, I'll be asking for a legislative hearing."

Shaffer, who leaves the state House on Dec. 31 because of term limits, said he will seek a hearing before he goes if the findings have not been released by then.

Shaffer has watched the case since February, when the girl's body was found in an upstairs bedroom, chained to her bed, unable to escape a house fire.

"I deserve some answers. The community deserves some answers," Shaffer said.

Meanwhile, the man who could decide whether the death will result in criminal prosecutions also attended Wednesday's event.

John McDonough, of Three Rivers, will run unopposed for St. Joseph County prosecutor in November, after defeating incumbent Prosecutor Douglas Fisher earlier this month in the Republican primary.

Fisher recently said a criminal investigation is continuing and suggested it could be among unresolved cases McDonough takes over in January.

"I'd say to these young people, do not lose faith," McDonough said, referring to former classmates who organized Wednesday's program to spotlight attention on the case.

"We live in the greatest country in the world and justice will be served when the time comes."



'God was there with Calista': St. Joseph County residents attend vigil to remember 16-year-old who died in fire

Posted by Kathy Jessup | Kalamazoo Gazette August 28, 2008 11:30AM

CENTREVILLE -- The innocent to the aged gathered in the Norman Rockwellesque town square here Wednesday to ask why.

Teenagers pressed their palms against the charred siding of a burned house that once had offered slaves a chance for freedom and asked why their friend had died there, as if a captive.

For six months, youths who organized Wednesday's community remembrance of 16-year-old Calista Springer have asked parents, ministers, public officials, neighbors and each other why she died in the Feb. 27 house fire while chained to her bed.

Nearly 150 people from across St. Joseph County offered prayers and retold stories about Calista during the service. But the people who gathered outside the St. Joseph County Courthouse, across the street from the house that once served as a stop on the Underground Railroad, agreed that finding peace will require finding answers.

"Perhaps each person present has his or her own private opinion about what occurred across the street," Pastor Karin Orr, of the Centreville United Methodist Church, told the crowd during the hourlong service.

"To some it was a flagrant example of abuse, to others a very unfortunate accident. To some it was the result of parents who were overstressed, without resources and respite. To others it was the horrific outcome of a frightening need for power and control.

"But no matter where you are on this issue, the bottom line is this: No one, no one should die the way Calista Springer did."

Child death also resonated with others who came to Centreville from nearby communities Wednesday. Several were from Constantine, where the November 2007 murder of 11-year-old Jodi Parrack remains unsolved. Others from Sturgis talked about the September 1997 disappearance of Brittany Beers, 6.

Behind the crowd was the burned and boarded home that Calista had shared with her father, Anthony Springer; adoptive mother, Marsha Springer; and two half-sisters. Officials have said Marsha Springer, who is legally blind, was the only other person in the house at the time of the blaze.

She escaped with minor injuries but said she was unable to aid Calista, whom firefighters later found dead, chained to her bed on the home's second floor.

Calista's friends and some adults have alleged that the girl was victimized by abuse and neglect for years and said they had reported the stories Calista had told them to school and Children's Protective Services officials.

In 1997, a grandmother and two aunts of Calista told police they believed the girl's parents abused her. Child-welfare

officials investigated and said they found no evidence of abuse, according to police reports at the time.

Officials in the office of U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, have said they were told in 2004 by child-welfare authorities that the situation in the Springer home was "under control." Upton's office had forwarded correspondence from a constituent who alleged that Calista was being abused.

Suzanne Langdon, Anthony Springer's mother, who was among those who made the 1997 report, addressed the crowd Wednesday.

"During her first three years, we had Calista a lot because Tony was going to Western (Michigan University)," said Langdon, of Three Rivers. "It was about 10 years ago that we saw marks on Calista and we reported it to CPS. We were told to stay out of it, that it was none of our business."

Langdon said she has been estranged from her son and his wife since raising the allegations.

The Springers have said Calista was a "special-needs child" with behavior problems and an eating disorder and required monitoring at night to keep her wandering in check. Anthony Springer has said that Calista had been restrained to her bed for a short time because a tether-and-alarm system used to monitor her was broken.

Neither Anthony Springer nor Marsha Springer has been charged with a crime in Calista's death, although authorities continue to investigate. Last week, Marsha Springer pleaded no contest to charges of child abuse and neglect in a custody case involving the couple's two other daughters, who have been placed in foster care.

Investigations into the state child-welfare system's past dealings with Calista and her family were launched by the Michigan Department of Human Services and the state's ombudsman's office shortly after the girl's death. No public findings have been released.

Norma Swegles, Calista's biological mother, also attended Wednesday's observance, using donations solicited by the young organizers to pay her transportation costs.

Orr said Calista's young friends have asked, "Where was God when Calista, dying in the heat and the smoke, was tied to her bed?"

"As a Christian pastor, I believe God was there with Calista, just as God was with the dying Christ on the cross, just as God is with you and me in our time of darkness and despair," Orr said. "Christ's physical death, like Calista's, was a cruelty beyond our imagining, an ugly, torturous way to go from this Earth. And Christ, too, felt abandoned and cried out, just as Calista must have felt abandoned and must have tried to cry out."

Orr said "much hard, truth-revealing work" must be done to assure that the Centreville girl's death brings change.

"We have to ask honestly and deal with them in the most transparent way possible," he said. "What, exactly, happened? Why did Calista die? Where were the parents, the siblings, the neighbors, the police, the schoolteachers and administrators, the social agencies like CPS, and, yes, the church congregations?"

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Jury deliberates verdict in death of 1-year-old boy

Thursday, August 28, 2008

By John S. Hausman
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MUSKEGON COUNTY -- The fate of a Muskegon man charged in the "cold case" murder of a 1-year-old boy was in the hands of jurors this morning.

On trial was Marcus Tulenkun Bolden, 23, of 2216 Peck. Bolden was charged with open murder in the death of Houston Curtis. Curtis died Feb. 1, 2004, at DeVos Children's Hospital of a brain injury and fractured skull, less than two days after sustaining the injury.

Bolden had recently begun dating the child's mother, Crystal Bell. He was not the father. The baby was alone in Bell's apartment with Bell and Bolden the night of Jan. 30-31, when the fatal injury occurred.

Jurors went home around 5:15 p.m. Wednesday after deliberating about 90 minutes. They resumed deliberations this morning.

In his closing argument Wednesday afternoon, Senior Assistant Muskegon County Prosecutor Dale J. Hilson urged jurors to convict Bolden of the maximum possible count: first-degree felony murder. In this case, that means committing murder while committing the felony of first-degree child abuse. That conviction would send Bolden to prison for life without chance of parole.

Jurors also could opt for second-degree unpremeditated murder, which carries a potential sentence of life or any term of years, with the chance of parole.

Hilson outlined the evidence presented at the five-day trial: medical testimony indicating Houston's head wound was no accident; Bell's testimony about her baby's final evening, leading up to her discovery of Houston lying on a bed at 2 a.m. Jan. 31 with a grossly swollen head and difficulty breathing; police testimony about Bolden's conflicting statements over the years; Bolden's written admission in March 2008 that he caused Houston's injury by throwing him down while angry at his crying, supposedly on a bed, causing the baby to bounce and strike a bedpost or the wall before falling on the floor.

"He treats (the baby) like a piece of trash, really," Hilson said.

Defense attorney Richard Terrell Taylor of Pontiac, in his closing argument, summarized much of the evidence that had been presented at the trial and asked for a not-guilty verdict.

Taylor highlighted a few discrepancies in prosecution witnesses' testimony, noting for example that only the baby's family members, not medical personnel, mentioned a deformed-looking head; pointed to different versions of exactly how the injury occurred (bouncing against a wall or a bedpost, or directly striking something hard with a protrusion, as a medical examiner testified); mentioning contradictions in Bell's statements at varying times; downplaying Bolden's 2008 admissions, calling them consistent with what he told police in 2004; and noting that Bolden voluntarily spoke with police.



Wednesday, August 27, 2008

Big Brother mentor sentenced for sex abuse of four boys

Charles E. Ramirez / The Detroit News

MOUNT CLEMENS -- Macomb County Circuit Court Judge Peter Maceroni today sentenced a former mentor with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America to a year in jail for sexually abusing four boys.

The judge's sentence for Perry Wilson, 43, of Richmond, also carried several other conditions, including:

- Having to wear a tether upon release from jail for six months.
- Registering with the state as a sex offender.
- Moving from his hometown of Richmond.
- Probation for 5 years.
- Not have any contact with children under the age of 17.

Last month, Wilson pleaded no contest to four counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct in the case. A no-contest plea is not considered an admission of guilt, but is treated as such at sentencing.

Prosecutors said he molested four boys, ages 7-14, between 2001 and 2008 while he was a mentor with the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.

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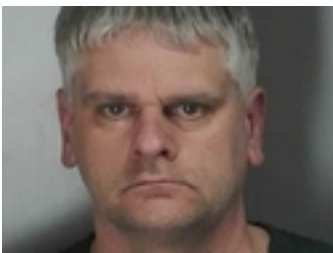
Thursday, August 28, 2008

Mount Clemens

Sex offender's apology fails to sway victims' families

'He isn't remorseful,' said one boy's grandmother about the Richmond man sentenced to one year in jail.

Charles E. Ramirez / The Detroit News



MOUNT CLEMENS -- Before being sentenced Wednesday in Macomb Circuit Court for sexually abusing four boys, Perry Wilson spent about 10 minutes addressing the court.

He paraphrased passages from the Bible, apologized for his actions and said he hoped his victims and their families heal over time.

"From this day forward, these dear families and me will bear a heavy burden," he said. "My prayer going forward is that these families and their children, when they look in the mirror, they don't see victims, but leaders and champions"

But Diane Giardini, the grandmother of one of Wilson's victims, wasn't buying any of it.

"It made me sick to my stomach," the 50-year-old from Eastpointe resident said. "He isn't remorseful."

The Detroit News typically doesn't name victims of sexual abuse.

Giardini made the remarks minutes after Macomb Circuit Judge Peter Maceroni sentenced Wilson, 43, of Richmond, to a year in jail for sexually abusing four boys.

The judge also sentenced Wilson to five years probation. Wilson will have to spend the first six months of the probation wearing a tether.

Police and prosecutors say Wilson molested four boys, ages 7-14, between 2001-08 while he was a mentor with the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.

Last month, he pleaded no contest to four counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct. A no-contest plea is not considered an admission of guilt, but is treated as such for sentencing purposes.

Wilson must register with the state as a sex offender, and Maceroni ordered him to leave his hometown of Richmond and have no contact with children under the age of 17.

Wilson's defense attorney said Wednesday he choose to forego a jury trial to spare the boys from having to testify.

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Thursday, August 28, 2008

Fatal beating unnerves Pontiac

Those who knew 'Frenchy' left wondering what could provoke assault; police want to charge 3 teens as adults.

Mike Martindale / The Detroit News

PONTIAC -- Friends and acquaintances of a 61-year-old homeless man, who police say died from injuries suffered in a beating by three teenagers also accused in other assaults, tried to make sense of his death on Wednesday.

The three suspects -- two 14 year olds and the other 15 -- remain in custody in Oakland County's Children Village and are expected to face charges Thursday in the death of Wilford Hamilton and three other apparent random attacks that have occurred over the past week.

Police want to charge the three juveniles as adults.

Residents and business owners were busy readying for this weekend's Arts, Beats & Eats festival and were reluctant to talk about the assaults on Wednesday. But as a street musician's saxophone reverberated down Saginaw Street, those who did talk questioned what would make someone beat someone to death.

"This could happen anywhere," said Nick Mansour, owner of the Pontiac Diner on Saginaw Street. "What do you blame? Movies? Lack of parents at home? The school system?"

Businessman Blair McGowan fears Hamilton's death will provide yet another reason for some skittish visitors to stay away from financially beleaguered Pontiac.

"It's really sad -- certainly for a man to lose his life for no reason but also for others who are struggling to survive," said McGowan, inspecting an alley between Water and Pike streets where Hamilton's body was found along a wall scrawled with graffiti.

Hamilton was homeless but most agreed harmless, said area merchants. Better known as "Frenchy" for his habit of wearing a beret, Hamilton abused alcohol and occasionally had hallucinations said Mansour, who said Hamilton once paraded naked around the downtown Phoenix Center.

Police said a 65-year-old homeless man was found unconscious from a separate beating by the same suspects on Saginaw last Friday.

At 10 p.m. Saturday a 52-year-old man walking along Pike Street on his way home from work made the mistake of telling a group of teens he passed that it looked like rain, police said. He was knocked to the ground and suffered broken ribs.

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Wednesday, August 27, 2008

Abraham's request for new bond denied

Associated Press

PONTIAC -- A judge has decided to keep Nathaniel Abraham in jail for violating his bond in a drug case.

Oakland County Circuit Judge Daniel O'Brien on Tuesday denied a request for a new bond by the defense attorney for Abraham.

The 22-year-old gained national attention at 11 for fatally shooting a teenager.

Attorney Byron Pitts argued Abraham didn't pose a flight risk despite leaving his house and walking down the block.

Assistant Prosecutor Beth Hand said she agreed with O'Brien's ruling that Abraham lost bond privileges. A message was left Wednesday for Pitts.

Abraham awaits trial on charges of possessing 254 Ecstasy tablets with intent to deliver, a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison. His next court date is Sept. 22.

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DHS scandal shows lack of accountability

Failures in child-care oversight should lead to serious consequences

AUGUST 28, 2008 • FROM LANSING STATE JOURNAL

One of the few positive things to be taken from recent audits of child-care programs in the state Department of Human Services is that the review period ended nearly two years ago.

Michigan residents can, therefore, hope things are better at DHS; that child-care licenses don't end up in the hands of criminals and that the state doesn't pay for nonexistent care.

But that's all Michigan can do - hope.

For the reviews of DHS performance between October 2003 and March 2006 show the standard operating procedure resulted in lax oversight, wasted money and children at risk.

The only way to be sure DHS and its elected overseers in the Legislature do better is, frankly, to punish poor performance.

Michigan already knows what it gets with the alternative of hoping for the best:

- The state authorized 428 people with "substantiated histories of child abuse" as child-care providers.
- The state authorized hundreds more providers with criminal backgrounds.
- The state may have made up to \$231 million in improper payments for child care.

Out of this embarrassment, this scandal, Michigan has what?

As far back as April 2007, DHS agreed to a bunch of recommendations made by the auditors. And when these reports surfaced, the current DHS leadership promised that oversight had improved.

Oh yes, DHS also pointed to staffing shortages.

At some point, public pledges to do better ring hollow, especially when it comes to basic oversight of services for children. Either Michigan is serious about taking care of its children or it isn't.

And if it is serious, then consequences must fall on agencies and people who fall short.

With campaign season gearing up, incumbents in the Michigan House of Representatives will be regaling audiences with their commitment to children. The words will be earnest, the tone heartfelt.

What's beyond the speeches, though?

In recent weeks, legislators of both parties have taken time to express their opposition to a ballot proposal that, problems aside, would have let the voters decide how much lawmakers are paid and how many there are.

Why weren't these legislators - who were on summer vacation - over at DHS listening to front-line workers' needs or offering to help out with the basic oversight functions (Here, check this name against this criminal database.) that have overtaxed DHS?

If voters don't hold politicians accountable, the politicians will not hold state agencies to account. Remember, it's for the kids.



August 28, 2008

Study: 12 percent of Indian deaths due to alcohol

Associated Press

Mary Clare Jalonick
Associated Press

WASHINGTON - Almost 12 percent of the deaths among American Indians and Alaska Natives are alcohol-related - more than three times the percentage in the general population, a new federal report says.

The report released today by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found 11.7 percent of deaths among American Indians and Alaska Natives between 2001 and 2005 were alcohol-related, compared with 3.3 percent for the U.S. as a whole.

Dwayne Jarman, a CDC epidemiologist who works for the Indian Health Service and is one of the study's authors, said it is the first national survey that measures American Indian deaths due to alcohol. It should be a "call to action" for federal, state, local and tribal governments, he said.

The researchers obtained their statistics by analyzing death certificates over the four-year period.

The two leading causes of alcohol-related deaths among Indians were traffic accidents and alcoholic liver disease, each of which cause more than a quarter of the 1,514 alcohol-related deaths over the four-year period.

Also listed are homicide (6.6 percent of alcohol-related deaths), suicide (5.2 percent) and injuries in falls (2.2 percent).

There may be many more alcohol-related deaths than the study shows, in part because the CDC analysis did not count deaths related to some diseases for which alcohol is believed to be an important risk factor, such as tuberculosis, pneumonia and colon cancer.

The greatest number of tribal alcohol-related deaths - about a third of the total - occurred in the Northern Plains, where reservations are remote and often destitute, the study said. The lowest number of deaths were in Alaska.

Jarman said the study did not look at why there may be more deaths in the Plains but said it is consistent with previous studies.

"It may be a function of social perceptions of alcohol in that particular region," he said. The report did not break down the numbers by tribe.

The study said more than 68 percent of the Indians whose deaths were attributed to alcohol were men, and 66 percent were people younger than 50 years old. Seven percent were less than 20 years old.

The study recommends "culturally appropriate clinical interventions" to reducing excessive drinking and better integration between tribal health care centers and tribal courts, which often deal with alcohol-related crimes.

Donovan Antelope, a spokesman for the Northern Arapaho Tribe, said alcoholism has been a problem for more than a century with many Indian populations.

"It has had a very negative impact on our day-to day life," he said, adding that the tribe has started promoting alcohol-free events.

In general, American Indians suffer much higher death rates of most leading causes than the rest of the country. Besides alcoholism, drug use, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and suicide also are high.



Thursday, August 28, 2008

Economy depresses Michigan well being

Christina Rogers / The Detroit News

The economic depression that has fatigued many Michigan businesses in the past few years appears to be grinding on the mental well-being of area residents as they struggle to cope with job losses and tightening finances.

Both private medical and social service agencies say demand is up for treatment of anxiety, depression and substance abuse as a gloomy mix of steep fuel costs, plummeting housing values and job market uncertainty takes its toll.

Doctors and therapists report that talk of financial troubles is coming up with greater frequency during therapy sessions, and in many cases, complicating existing psychological conditions.

"Most of our patients are living paycheck-to-paycheck, so there is no relief or sense of moving upwards," said Andrew Konwiak, administrative director for St. John Health's Eastwood Clinics, a network of substance abuse and mental health treatment centers in southeast Michigan. "Every time there is a recession in Michigan, our demand for substance abuse services goes up."

At the same time, many of those afflicted have lost their jobs and their health benefits, putting immense pressure on public agencies.

From 2003, before Michigan's economy started its freefall, to last year, the number of adult patients served by publicly-funded mental health centers has jumped nearly 18 percent, to 129,874 statewide, according to Michigan health department records.

"We are in a perfect storm right about now," said Roberta Sanders, CEO of New Center Community Mental Health Services in Detroit. The monthly tally of new patients being seen at the clinic has more than doubled since January to 127 new patients by the end of July, she said.

"I'm looking at the comments," said Sanders, flipping through the clinic's sign-in book. "I'm seeing a heck of a lot of depression."

Many unqualified for help

Some experts say the problem is much deeper than numbers suggest. An increasing number of people are arriving at the clinics because they've recently become uninsured and are battling psychological troubles prompted by a job loss or a home foreclosure, agency officials say.

But many of them aren't eligible for the service because their incomes are too high or their ailments not severe enough.

"The need is much greater than what we serve," Amy Zaagman, associate director for the Michigan

Association of Community Mental Health Boards, a trade group for the public mental health agencies. "The biggest conundrum for us is people have to be really sick or Medicaid eligible" to receive treatment, she said. Symptoms, such as mild depression or anxiety, often don't qualify them for service, she added.

While there may be no good way to quantify just how big the problem is, anecdotally, some therapists say it is among the worse they've seen in recent years.

Call volumes are up at the Mental Health Association of Michigan whose Southfield office has been flooded with requests in the last year from people seeking mental health services, said Bill Tennant, the Southfield organization's associate director of programs. "We've received more calls the last year than we ever have in the last five years I've been here," Tennant said.

Many of the calls are from people who've lost a job or home and are "looking for an avenue of help" to deal with money-related anxieties, he said.

Dr. Cathy Frank, director of outpatient psychiatric services at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, has also observed a similar increase in patients grappling with money-related stresses, noting that the number of new patients coming in with this complaint has been "very very significant."

"Certainly, in the years I've been in practice, I've never seen anything quite like this," she said.

Frank, a psychiatrist, said the practice usually see two types of patients suffering from economy-related worries: people who have lost their jobs and are "quite shattered by that," and people who haven't lost their jobs yet, but feel anxious that they might.

"They're sort of waiting for the other ax to drop and that's a constant stress" she said.

Public assistance payees up

In the private sector, many practices who treat privately-insured patients are also feeling the pinch of the state's economic rut. In some cases, therapists are seeing fewer patients because more people are losing their employer-backed insurance or stopping therapy because of higher out-of-pocket costs. Others are merely keeping afloat.

Hospital-affiliated outpatient clinics are also treating more Medicaid patients for mental health services.

For instance, St. John's Eastwood Clinics said its payer mix has changed drastically over the last couple years. A year ago, patients on public assistance accounted for about 25 percent of their business; now that's up to one-third of revenues, Konwiak said.

For Lori Eldelson, owner of the Birmingham Maple Clinic, a private outpatient practice, the economic downturn has meant some stability for her office in Oakland County.

Despite patients leaving because they no longer have insurance or are moving out of state, the clinic is drawing enough new patients to keep business steady. Many of its therapists are also working longer hours or taking on more patients to offset lower reimbursement rates from insurers -- yet another challenge facing mental health professionals as insurers also look to cut costs, she said.

"We're opening as many cases as we ever had even when the population is diminishing," she said. "It is keeping business afloat and constant," she said.

But she was quick to note that her own business's stability in this crippling economic downturn is -- well, depressing in itself.

"That's a sad statement about the emotional state of our citizens," Eldelson said.

"There are places closing down, people leaving the state, but the business of mental health is remaining steady."

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Letter: Eroding economic foundation**Posted by [mlscott](#) August 28, 2008 09:00AM**

It always amazes me when fellow Americans turn to the financial markets to gauge the economic well-being of the United States.

When you consider that the financials are composed primarily of large-scale corporations working to cut costs -- at all costs (downsizing their workforce, reducing wages, eliminating insurance and health benefits, outsourcing American production and labor to overseas markets to increase profits for their shareholders), is it any real wonder why our nation is in such an economic crisis?

Without jobs, who can buy products and services, let alone pay for the very necessities of life that keep this country afloat? How can we expect someone to pay their mortgage when they have no job? Moreover, how much longer can we expect America to stand when we allow the very economic foundation of our country to be usurped, eroded away and outsourced by corporations so eager and willing to relocate our jobs to places like China, Taiwan, and Mexico? Think about it.

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